

CARL SANDBURG: AN AMERICAN HOMER

BY J. V. NASH

IN Carl Sandburg, the striving and struggling humanity of America's plains and farms and cities has found an inspired literary voice. He has gathered up the inchoate folk-lore of that which Whitman called "These States," and has given it form and permanency in our literature. He is the poet of the rough and toiling masses, of the workers who lift the steel of the skyscraper and who drive the long, straight furrows through the black soil of the prairies. His language is their language; it springs directly from human emotions, as free from all artificial veneer and bookish allusiveness as is that of Homer. He pours forth the native, spontaneous speech of the people who live close to earth and to life's realities, as he has learned it in his own intimate contact with them.

There is an epic sweep to much of Sandburg's verse which tells us that here is a man of heroic mold. He is best explained by the factors of heredity and environment that have made him what he is. As his name suggests, he is of Scandinavian ancestry, descended from those hard-living, two-fisted, giant-framed berserkers of the North, who roved the seas, to Iceland, to Greenland, to mysterious Vinland, and who carved out kingdoms in France, in England, in Sicily, and in Russia. He is of the tribe of Leif the Lucky, Erick the Red, Norman William, and Rurik.

Along with the Scandinavian blood, there is, as he himself fancies, a strain of the dreaming, brooding, mystic Asiatic. "My father was a dark Swede," he tells us. "He had dark hair and brown eyes, and came from Asposoken, in the north of Sweden. I flatter myself sometimes in thinking that maybe somewhere back in my history there may be a Mongol or one of those old Asiatics. I have a sense for fantasy that runs through the Nordic folk-lore, but I do not have the Oriental's sense for plot."

His affinity with both the city and the country is perhaps explained by the fact that he was born in Galesburg, Illinois, a city on the edge of the great prairies. The date of his birth was January 6, 1878, when the memories of the Civil War were yet fresh, and pioneer conditions still prevailed in much of the midwestern country. Sandburg's father toiled in a railroad blacksmith shop, and his mother became prematurely aged through the struggles which she endured in their life of poverty.

"His boyhood," says Sandburg's intimate friend and former coworker on the Chicago *Daily News*, Harry Hansen, "was filled with harsh episodes, with meagre schooling, with little room for self-improvement. He worked hard, tried all sorts of jobs; the hours were long; the work unremitting. The fight for sustenance left deep scars on his sensitive nature."

At thirteen years of age, we find Sandburg driving a milk-wagon in Galesburg; a little later he was a porter in a barber shop, and after that he worked in a brick-yard. Then he decided to take Horace Greeley's advice and "go west." His journey was not made in a Pullman car, but largely by freight and "riding the rods." In Kansas he labored in the harvest fields, taking away souvenirs of the job in the form of blisters and callouses on hands and feet. Afterwards, he was employed as a dishwasher for hotels in Kansas City, Omaha, and Denver. At another time, with a pot of black asphaltum and a brush in his hand, he went from house to house, painting stoves in payment for his meals.

Such experiences, from which a person of more fastidious tastes would have revolted in disgust, furnished Sandburg with rich materials for the poetry of later years.

Returning from his *Wanderjähre*, he took up again his job on the milk-wagon route in Galesburg for a time; then he became apprenticed to the trade of house painter. By now, it was the year 1898. He was just twenty years old as the war with Spain began to loom on the horizon. Such an opportunity for fresh adventure, of course, proved irresistible. He joined the Sixth Illinois Infantry, which was sent to Porto Rico.

This experience, remote as it seemed from literary pursuits, proved to be the means of placing his feet on the pathway to authorship. For, while serving in the army, he fell in with a young fellow who had attended Lombard College, at Galesburg, and whose talk was all about college. A desire for the schooling which had been

denied to young Sandburg now came upon him with powerful appeal; and, on his return to Galesburg, he managed to matriculate as a special student at Lombard. He was never a regular student, and so was not graduated; but in later years Lombard conferred upon him an honorary degree.

He began now to read books, his interests ranging over a wide field but centering largely in biography. A yearning to write had, even in the old milk-wagon days, been surging subconsciously within him and doubtless was an impelling factor in steering him toward college. At Lombard he met a sympathetic instructor in the person of Philip Green Wright, who taught English, mathematics, and astronomy, and who took a fatherly interest in struggling youths with literary aspirations. He it was who first sensed the unborn poet in Carl Sandburg.

Professor Wright encouraged Sandburg and two other congenial fellows to form a little society called "The Poor Writers' Club." The members met on Sunday afternoons at Wright's home, read each other's productions, and exchanged criticism and commendation. It was through Wright's kindly aid that Sandburg's first book, a slender and now long forgotten volume of poems, paper-bound and entitled *In Reckless Ecstasy*, found publication. It was printed by the Asgard Press, at Galesburg, in 1904.

After leaving college, Sandburg again drifted about the country, enriching his experience all the time. He was a traveling salesman for Underwood and Underwood, the commercial photographers. Later he entered newspaper work in Milwaukee, where he was destined to meet his wife-to-be. On June 15, 1908, he was married there to Miss Lillian Steichen.

Then came Sandburg's brief experience in the political field. In 1910, Emil Seidel, a Socialist, was elected Mayor of Milwaukee. He made Sandburg his secretary. Two years in this position gave Sandburg a first-hand knowledge of practical politics in a big city; he mingled with all the diverse types of men who throng about, and do business with, the City Hall—ward committeemen, aldermen, labor leaders, and what not.

Then Chicago called to Sandburg. He secured a position with *System Magazine*, writing trenchant articles on factory management and various phases of the industrial process. One day he met N. D. Cochran, a leader in the struggle for clean government and social justice, who was just then establishing a tabloid newspaper

called *The Daybook*. Sandburg joined the new venture with enthusiasm; but the newspaper, which carried no advertising and lacked adequate financial support, speedily languished and was discontinued. The big guns were now barking, across the Atlantic: popular interest centered in the European War.

Once more out of employment—it was by this time 1917—Sandburg thought of Henry Justin Smith, news editor of the great *Daily News*, whose acquaintance he had already formed. Smith immediately offered Sandburg a berth on the staff of that metropolitan afternoon paper. His connection with the *News* has continued ever since, except for an interval in 1918, when he made an extended trip through the Scandinavian countries under the auspices of the Newspaper Enterprise Association. While abroad, he formed first-hand contacts with the Old World background, historical and social as well as political, which greatly broadened his outlook. He wrote numerous articles on conditions in the countries which he visited.

Sandburg's extraordinary familiarity with industrial matters and his sympathetic understanding of the workers' point of view made him especially valuable as a writer on labor topics. "Strikes, lockouts, boycotts," as Hansen puts it, "were his daily fare; he listened to the grievances of teamsters and garment workers; he heard labor leaders at their daily counsels and discussed 'the men' with employers. From day to day he followed the fortunes of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America in their bitter but successful battle for recognition and justice in Chicago. For three years he attended conventions of the American Federation of Labor." For a time, too, he served as motion-picture critic for the *Daily News*, raising this new form of criticism to a high level and giving it a distinctive tone quite different from that of the "blurbs" which had been accepted as the norm in this field.

It was the impact of Chicago upon the sensitive soul of Sandburg that brought forth his first book of poems after he reached maturity. The volume was entitled *Chicago Poems* (Henry Holt & Co., 1915). In these poems he presents the various human types that are to be found in the great capital of the Middle West—"the hog butcher of the world," as he sees the city in one of its aspects,

"Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth,
half-naked, sweating, proud to be Hog Butcher, Tool
Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads, and

Freight Handler to the Nation."

Here we meet, as we turn the pages, workers of every stripe—peddlers, factory hands, shovel wielders, icemen, cash girls, roustabouts, and "pigstickers."

Next came *Cornhuskers*, Sandburg's second book of poems (Holt, 1918). Now he turns from the city to the wide prairies and memories of his vagabonding days:

"O prairie mother, I am one of your boys.
I have loved the prairie as a man with a heart shot full
of pain over love.
Here I know I will hanker after nothing so much as one
more sunrise or a sky moon of fire doubled to a river
moon of water."

In *Smoke and Steel* (Harcourt, 1920), the scene shifts again to the city, with excursions back to the country, and reminiscences of his trip abroad.

Then, in *Slabs of the Sunburnt West* (Harcourt, 1922), the country and the city mingle together.

Through these years of observation and writing, Sandburg has been shedding the bitterness of earlier days and growing broader and mellow. Only a cynic would attribute the change to the author's increasing material prosperity under the capitalistic system. A better clew may be found in the old saying—of Montaigne, I believe—"to understand everything is to forgive everything."

Sandburg's books of poetry, by the way, were never composed deliberately, "with malice aforethought." It is said that he had a wire basket on his desk in the newspaper office. At the close of a busy day, he would sit there musing over the events of that day. Then, seizing his pencil, he would jot down some lines of verse and throw them into the basket. After a sufficient quantity had accumulated, he would gather them up, study them, work over and expand them: thus his great poems were born.

In "The Windy City," one of the poems in *Slabs of the Sunburnt West*, Sandburg incarnates, in appropriately heterogeneous verses, the spirit of the great, sprawling, roaring, striving, windy metropolis that he loves so well—Chicago.

"Winds of the Windy City,
Winds of corn and sea blue,
Spring wind white and fighting winter gray,
Come home here—they nickname a city for you.

"The wind of the lake shore waits and wanders.
 The heave of the shore wind hunches the sand piles.
 The winkers of the morning stars count out cities and
 forget the numbers."

"It is one of the most revealing epics of the city ever written," thinks Hansen. "It tells its story pictorially, historically, emotionally—a story by sights, sounds, and smells. There is in it something of the broad-shouldered swagger, the braggadocio, that was once more generally characteristic of Chicago than it is now. There is in it the voice of the city, expressed in its buildings and in its people, in its achievements and in its vile oppressions. There is in it the note of change, of constant upheaval and turmoil. . ."

On the other hand, when in the right mood, Sandburg can be delicately tender and idealistic, as in "Lost" and "Under the Harvest Moon."

At times, in Sandburg's poetry, the Whitman note sounds out unmistakably, as in the following lines from "Prairie," the first poem in *Cornhuskers*:

"I speak of new cities and new people.
 I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes.
 I tell you yesterday is a wind gone down, a sun dropped
 in the west.
 I tell you there is nothing in the world only an ocean of
 to-morrows, a sky of to-morrows."

Like the bards of old, Carl Sandburg is a singer. In his deep, rich voice he chants, to the accompaniment of his guitar or to a few simple chords on the piano, many of the ballads of our American folk-lore. His voice ranges over but a few notes, and sometimes sounds like a soft crooning, but the total effect is of pure art. And there are those who hope that out of Sandburg's minstrelsy there may one day spring a great American native opera—an opera of Chicago and the open spaces of the prairies, an opera infinitely more vital than most of the tinsel mediaeval importations from Europe.

His speaking voice, too, has unique qualities. "Carl Sandburg's voice," said William B. Owen, late Principal of the Chicago Normal College, "should be perpetuated on records. For like the voice of Tennyson, it is an unforgettable and essential part of his poems." Under the spell of his impressive intonation, his hearers find in Sandburg's verses, formless thought they may be, a beauty and a charm which they had not perceived in them before.

But there is another Sandburg, the Sandburg of the love lyric and of the children's poems. Here he strikes a different note. In the love poems there is a finely restrained sentiment, never rising to extravagant heights, never slopping over; and, in the children's poems, there is genuine participation in the happy spirit of child life.

Then there is Sandburg the story-teller, who first revealed himself in the *Rootabaga Stories*. These exquisite fairy tales Sandburg wrote informally for his own children—"for the kids at home," as he confided to the group of lunch-room cronies to whom he first read some of the stories in manuscript. Publication was an after-thought.

While the *Rootabaga Stories* are fairy tales, they are ones springing out of the modern American environment, just as the older, conventional fairy tales grew out of the fancies of mediaeval European life. Sandburg himself regards them as simple folk-lore yarns—droll stories without the stock trimmings of the ordinary fairy tale. His invention of new, odd words, such as *spanch*, is reminiscent of Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*.

Last of all, there is Sandburg the historian, revealed in the great historical opus, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* (Harcourt, 1926). For all midwestern authors, the saga of Abraham Lincoln seems to possess an irresistible fascination, especially for those who have lived in direct contact with the prairie people among whom Lincoln spent his formative years. As a new and fresh interpretation of the Lincoln of Illinois, this work is an invaluable addition to the great and growing Lincoln literature.

Sandburg dwells in a roomy old house at Elmhurst, on the fringe of Chicago. The building, seventy-odd years old, may have seen Lincoln's tall figure in the days of the great Douglas debates. Out in front, immemorial elms throw a dreamy shade about the place. There he has his den on an upper floor, looking out over a barn. In this retreat he works, surrounded by books overflowing everywhere. There are prints tacked on the walls, and huge metal cans crammed with newspaper clippings from all over the world—odds and ends of information such as the professional author is ever collecting.

So we leave Sandburg, as, now slightly stooping and with gray-haired head, he advances through the years of middle life.